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Tackling Youth Disorder in Danvers, Massachusetts

By Tammy Rinehart

Danvers, Mass. is a town of 24,174 residents that maintains a police force of 44 sworn officers. During 1995, a survey of Danvers merchants revealed that their primary crime concern was loitering and vandalism in the downtown business district. A citizen survey that year confirmed that loitering was also a concern for the general public. This survey showed that citizens feared going out into the square after dark. Many citizens, particularly elderly residents, were intimidated by youth in the area and concerned about being injured by skateboards or in-line skaters (skateboarders even waxed the steps to the Senior Center). Additional analysis showed that the skating, skateboarding, and loitering also led to damaged property, including significant damage to church steps, bank property, benches, and a million-dollar fire in 1996. This problem had been occurring for several years.



The town of Danvers took a problem-solving approach to this problem. A Total Quality Management (TQM) committee of police officers was formed, the Downtown

Improvement Committee became involved, and the Danvers Police Department and the Downtown Improvement Committee jointly applied and received a COPS Problem-Solving Partnerships grant. The group determined that business owners, property owners in Danvers Square, pedestrians, motorists, youth, police, the local department of public works, and fire fighters were stakeholders who had to address this problem.

Analysis

To learn more about the loitering problem, who was involved, the extent of damage and intimidation associated with the loitering, when the problem was occurring, and why the downtown area was the focus of the loitering and damage, police officers conducted interviews with the merchants and customers and youth downtown. They also analyzed police calls for service, researched legislation and ordinances on bicycle and skateboard regulations, and reviewed accident reports for the area. An intern from a local college performed environmental surveys of the target location. Elected officials formed a Skateboard/In-line Skating Committee. It was composed of a selectman, two youth (one skateboarder, one in-line skater), and representatives from the school, the recreation committee, the police department, the business community, and a citizen. They met to develop solutions to the problem.

Analysis of the information they gathered revealed that vandalism to steps, railings, and benches downtown was a result of youth using skateboards and in-line skates on surfaces that were inappropriate for this use. Elderly residents reported being afraid of being knocked down by youth on skateboards. They also felt threatened by large groups of youth who gathered in front of stores and blocked entrances or loitered in front of the ATM machine. The activities were occurring after school and into early evening. They primarily involved youth who either walked downtown, rode skateboards or skates, or were dropped off by parents. The youth did not have another convenient location conducive to these activities.



In a survey, 56 percent of businesspersons interviewed stated that skateboarding and loitering youth were a problem in the downtown. Of the remaining businesspersons interviewed, all of them mentioned a problem with youth loitering in the past. Three out of four of these business owners/managers specifically attributed the reduction of skateboarders or loitering youth to the bench removal. At the time of the interviews, benches that had been attracting skateboarders and skaters had been removed. However, a couple business owners claimed that removal of the benches moved the youth onto their front steps or into their doorways.

The impact of the skateboarding and skating activities were financially burdensome to the merchants who repaired the vandalism and lost customer business. Police who respond to numerous complaints said they considered dedicating full-time officers to the area.

Responses

The response to this problem was twofold: to build a skateboard park at Plains Park (an established recreational area in close proximity to downtown Danvers) and to pass a local ordinance prohibiting in-line skating and skateboarding within the downtown business area. (For a copy of the law, a description of the penalties, or park regulations visit: www.danverspolice.com/byskate.htm).

This multi-faceted response addressed both the needs of the youth and the merchant. The young people have an appropriate place for their activity within a reasonable distance from where they live and go to school. Meanwhile, merchants no longer have the activity in front of their stores. The park was funded with contributions from citizens, businesses, civic organizations, a bake sale, and a state grant. According to an article in the *Boston Business Journal*, a park similar to the one in Danvers costs \$12,000-\$14,000 to build.

The primary issues that Danvers considered when they decided to implement a skateboard park included: location, liability, safety equipment requirements (including whether to permit the use of the park by cyclists), management, and hours of operation. To select the location, the committee solicited feedback from residents through community meetings and considered the sizes of the nominated areas, opportunity for police and community observation, safety provisions, traffic flow around the area, surrounding land use, and proximity to downtown.

The town researched liability issues through their insurance company. It described the liability as similar to that of a neighborhood playground. The insurance costs for the first year of operation were funded entirely by a personal check from one citizen at a community meeting.



Discussions about safety equipment included multiple issues. Some opposed stringent requirements for equipment due to fairness considerations, because Plains Park also hosts pick up football or basketball games for which protective gear is not required. Another stance was the continual concern for liability. The final consideration was safety. Posted rules specify that participants must wear safety equipment (elbow pads, knee pads, wrist guards, and a helmet), along with a disclaimer that "Skateboard and in-line skating is at your own risk."

However, safety gear requirements have been difficult to enforce and are frequently ignored. To reduce the potential for injuries, bicycles are not permitted in the park. The recreation department is responsible for the management of the skateboard park and oversees the activities at Plains Park. Hours of operation mirror those for the other activities at Plains Park (dawn to dusk).

Assessment

An assessment of the response revealed that skateboarders and in-line skaters are using the new equipment. Complaints of loitering youth and skateboarders from business owners downtown have significantly diminished. During post-response interviews with downtown merchants, not one of the 14 individuals interviewed complained about skateboarding or in-line skaters, compared to five out of nine complaints (56 percent) during the interviews prior to the response. Also, during the second interview, 29 percent of businesspersons interviewed specifically mentioned a decline in problems associated with skateboarding or in-line skating. Within the comment section of the post-response community survey, one resident said, "The greatest advantage of community policing is reducing youth in the [Danvers] Square and skateboard vandalism of property." Additionally, calls for service for skateboarders or skaters downtown have decreased from 36 calls from January through September 1996 to eight calls from January to September 1998.

Follow Up

Downtown merchant interviews, the post-response community survey, and police calls for service downtown

show that the problems were successfully addressed. However, a different problem emerged. In the post response interviews, four of 14 merchants cited specific problems with youth on bikes driving recklessly or blocking pathways to the store or on sidewalks. Motorists have complained to police because of narrowly avoided collisions with cyclists. The youth that continue to loiter in the square say that they are simply there to meet friends and not to cause any harm.

When Danvers Police realized that a new problem was emerging, they decided to initiate a new problem-solving project. They found that the youth are the same age as those who had been skateboarding and skating. The problems generated were also vandalism, obstruction of walkways, littering, and intimidation of customers and residents. A phone booth outside of a store has been identified as a facilitator to this problem and removal of the phone is being considered as a potential response. The police have also researched the laws regarding bicycles. The analysis of the problem is still ongoing.

To obtain additional details about the problem-solving process in Danvers, Mass., about the maintenance efforts to the skateboard and skating problem, or to learn about the bicycle problem that has arisen in Danvers, please contact Lieutenant Jon Tiplady with the Danvers Police Department at jtiplady@star.net or 978-774-1212.

